Tales from Uganda
Surviving on the streets

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IT’S the start of the second term of school. Boys and girls in smart uniforms carry suitcases and mattresses as they prepare to leave home for their studies. But for 13-year old Brian Semanda, it's just another day in his routine search for scrap metal, which he sells to survive on the streets of Kampala, Uganda’s capital.
"I'm originally from Nyendo, Masaka district, but have been on the street since August last year. I came here because it was getting hard to stay home after the death of our mother. Dad had died sometime earlier."

Brian is one of seven children. When their parents died they were shared amongst their uncles. Although they continued staying in their parents' house, each had an allocated uncle to go to for books, school fees or if they fell sick. But they all soon dropped out of school.

That's when Brian decided to come to Kampala. "I told my family that I came to search for work. But I can't let them know that I am on the street. They will definitely laugh at me. I mainly move around Kiseka market, where I collect scrap. Some dealers buy a kilo for 500 Ugandan shillings (20 American cents), others at 600 shillings. There are different types of scrap, normally steel is the cheapest. If the gods smile for you and you get copper scrap, a kilo is worth 10,000 shillings. There are other types of scraps, but the dealer decides into which category your scrap falls. The money I get from selling scrap is for my daily living."

At night, Brian sweeps the streets. He collects the rubbish into heaps and loads them onto the Kampala City Council rubbish truck that passes by every morning. "We are about seven kids who sweep this street. Each is paid a different amount according to his ability to bargain. I sweep from the Kyagwe Road Junction to near Lohane Arcade. For this, our boss pays me 55,000 shillings a week. He pays us every Saturday afternoon. I use 5,000 shillings and save the rest in a bank. I have an account with Centenary Bank, Owino Branch."

Brian plans to get off the streets once he saves up enough money in his account. "That's when I will go to the village and bring my brothers to work with me in a shop or some other business," he adds.

"I like Kiseka market because people here are very united. Most of them know me. Some even give me work, like collecting their rubbish and taking it to the collection site. Because of the way we look, many take us for thieves or rotten people. So at times you are walking behind a lady and someone snatches her phone or bag and runs, when she turns, you are the first one she will point to. When this happens, and you're in a place where they don't know you, you will get a good
beating before being taken to the police. But if it’s here, people will defend me because they know me. Even the policemen know us; they call us 'ba dogo ba street', the kids who stay on the streets."

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